

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

THE ARTHURIAN CYCLE.

THE TWO LAST CENTURIES OF BRITAIN. By W. H. Babcock. 12 vols., pp. 250. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co.

Mr. Babcock, like many others, has been fascinated by the difficulties and obscurities of that period of English history which lies between the departure of the Romans and the final conquest by the Saxons, and especially the fifth and sixth centuries. The materials for this period are of such a character that the conclusions reached depend mainly upon the personal tendencies and habit of mind of the student. He may reject nearly everything as mere legend, or he may accept the reality of events dimly shadowed forth, and endeavor to give substance and consistency to the fragmentary records by the free use of analogy, inference, and imagination. The information to be derived from Gildas, Nennius and the Chronicles, is, in many respects, as far from demonstrability as that which is presented by the Welsh Bards and Sir Thomas Malory. It is indeed strange that some of the alleged events of those lost centuries so fixed themselves in the popular mind that neither time nor change has been able to shake or dislodge them with the common people; that whereas events regarding the reality of which there is no room for doubt have passed into oblivion, the Arthurian Cycle, believed by many scholars to be purely mythical, has resisted all the usual solvent of tradition, and has made a mark, not only upon English, but also upon European history, as deep as that impressed by the Carlovingian romances.

The general view taken by Mr. Babcock of what hap-

pened during the fifth and sixth centuries has the merit of offering an intelligible and comparatively straightforward narrative. It is plausible, and it meets

many difficulties. Prof. in the nature of the case,

there can be none. The most that can be looked for

is such a general drift of suggestion as will fit in with

known facts when the first ground of real history is

reached. Mr. Babcock disposes of the ethnological and other difficulties which have arisen in the

about the making of English. He appears that in

a period of such uncertainty, nearly all the seemingly

irreconcilable points referred to may have co-existed,

but, broadly speaking, from the departure of the

Romans the Britons are assumed to have been engaged

in a prolonged struggle with the Saxons, whose invasions proceeded very gradually, who were often driven back, often held years in one place, but who by slow degrees gained a better foothold. In the time of Am-
basius, who is supposed by the author to have re-
occupied the place of Imperator, the Saxons had
gained. After Ambasius had passed away, then arises
the debatable period of the Arthurian empire; and here
Mr. Babcock exhibits a great deal of ingenuity. Among the chief difficulties of this epoch is the ubiquity of
Arthur. His genius is a knotty point, and perhaps
Mr. Babcock is as near the truth as any one is likely to
get in surmising that he was not of princely birth,
but won his kingdom for himself. For it does not seem
possible to get over the significance of the fact that
Uther, his alleged father, is utterly ignored by the
earliest chronicles, while none of the early bards who
have written about Arthur say anything of his ancestry.
At a time when high lineage was of the first conse-
quence, such ommissions are almost equivalent to ex-
plicit declarations that Arthur was not of royal per-
haps not even of noble descent. What he was he
made himself, apparently, and the want of his
candidacy certainly warrants this interpretation.

But if we accept Arthur as a bold master, we are only at the beginning of difficulties. For we are next called upon to explain an alleged activity on his part which apparently carried him victoriously arms and banners to the British Isles. It is true that
Nennius gives a list of battles fought by Arthur
against the Saxons, but unfortunately the utmost
researches of scholars have hitherto failed to determine
where these battles were fought. The names given by
the old chronicler correspond to no known sites, and as
the chronology of Arthur's campaigns is wholly con-
jectural, the most diverse and incompatible conclusions
have been come to. Some of his battles have been
located in half a dozen different and widely-separated
places, and consider how confused this characterizes
all the speculations upon the subject. Mr. Babcock
has done as great pains to restore something like order
to the Arthurian period, and his arguments are dis-
tinguished by ingenuity and wide reading. It is
inevitable that in such a disarray the phrase "it
may be" should appear frequently, and equally in-
evitable that no matter what theory is advanced, it
must be liable to attack at unorthodox. Of course
those who prefer to explain King Arthur and his
Round Table as a Saxon myth will simply brush
away all mention of Arthur as a historical personage,
but we think the time has come when by
general concensus of good authorities the reality of
Arthur may be accepted. The arguments for his ex-
istence are of all events more thinkable than those on
the mythical side, and this consideration is sufficient
to give serious weight to this disputation.

Mr. Babcock goes so far as to suggest that Arthur
may have gone to Brittany, that in fact his absence
then may have afforded the opportunity which his
enemies, that intelligence of Lancelot's disloyal-
ty, and with Guinevere probably reached him when
he was abroad, and drove him home to fight his
last battle. Whatever one may think of the evidence
upon which this kind of subterfuge is built, it is
at least as much as can be said to have anything
that happened during those last centuries, and if the
whole invasion prefers to retain the picturesque
hue and nobility and heroism and chivalry of the
Arthurian cycle as depicted in the old legends—only
lapping away the supernatural excrescences which
have grown on the original stories there is really
nothing to be gained by any indulgence in this pre-
possession. Arthur may have been in Brittany, he
may have been in Scotland. He may have fought at
the south and at the north. To reconstruct all these
allegations it is only necessary to spread his cam-
paigns over a number of years, and in doing that we
shall after all merely be reading the old Chronicle
as its author meant it to be read. Also we are justified
in believing that Arthur was opposed principally
to Cerdic the Saxon, and that he fought and beat that
notorious chieftain in such a series of important
battles that the Saxon power was paralyzed for a
time, and was compelled to remain shut up within
the boundaries prescribed by the conqueror. Curious
it is surely that the passing of Arthur should be
surrounded by as much mystery as his advent; and of
this circumstance we must expect the myth-advo-
cates to make the most, but there may be sufficient
reasons even for this mystery.

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